



Complexity in College Admission

The Barriers
Between Aspiration
and Enrollment for
Lower-Income Students

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the College Board

The College Board is a mission-driven not-for-profit organization that connects students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the College Board was created to expand access to higher education. Today, the membership association is made up of more than 5,900 of the world's leading educational institutions and is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education. Each year, the College Board helps more than seven million students prepare for a successful transition to college through programs and services in college readiness and college success — including the SAT® and the Advanced Placement Program®. The organization also serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators and schools.

For further information, visit www.collegeboard.org.

The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center

The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center was established to transform education in America. Guided by the College Board's principles of excellence and equity in education, we work to ensure that students from all backgrounds have the opportunity to succeed in college and beyond. We make critical connections between policy, research and real-world practice to develop innovative solutions to the most pressing challenges in education today.

For further information, visit advocacy.collegeboard.org.

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Reducing the Complexity of College Admission

The College Board conducted this research to answer three primary questions:

- **Do lower-income students and their parents find the college application process overly complex?**
- **If so, what particular barriers get in the way of applying or enrolling? Lack of understanding? Lack of confidence? Other obstacles?**
- **What issues or people have the biggest influence on their decisions?**

Telephone interviews were conducted in April 2011 with 604 lower-income students (household income equal to or less than \$60,000) who took the SAT; 100 higher-income students (household income above \$60,000) who took the SAT; and 100 lower-income parents of students who took the SAT. The margin of error was +/- 3.4 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

This research follows our initial October 2010 report (*Complexity in College Admission: Fact or Urban Myth*), which found that, contrary to conventional wisdom, students and parents do not find the college application process overly complex.

These surveys are part of the College Board's broader, multiyear effort to strengthen the transition from high school to college, which is being overseen by the 14-member Admissions in the 21st Century Task Force Implementation Committee. Our findings and recommendations are designed for admission, financial aid, enrollment and counseling professionals.

ADMISSION IS STRESSFUL, BUT NOT TOO COMPLEX



Our first report in this series, *Complexity in College Admission: Fact or Urban Myth* (October 2010), found that applying to college was a fairly straightforward (though moderately stressful) process for students and parents. Complexity and stress for students and parents alike increased as the number of applications rose. Other key findings can be found on the College Board website.



1

Lower-income students have similar or higher aspirations than higher-income students to attend college and are confident about navigating the college admission process.

Findings

Lower-income students:

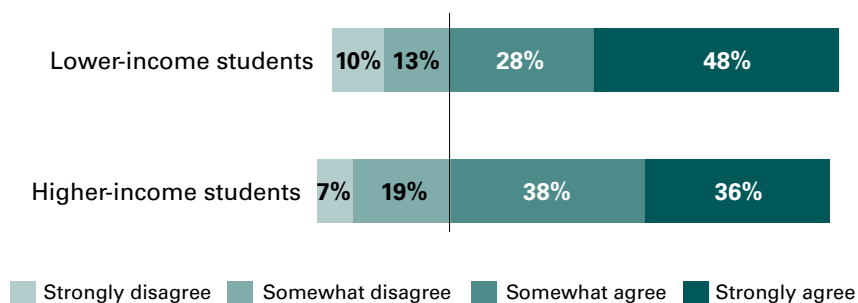
- Are much more likely than higher-income students (48 percent to 36 percent) to strongly agree that a college degree is needed “to be successful in life.”
- Understand their options after high school and are just as likely as their higher-income peers to rate a four-year college as their top postsecondary option and to believe that a “prestigious” four-year college is better than a “typical” one.
- Are more likely than their higher-income peers to strongly disagree that starting at a two-year college and transferring to a four-year college is just as good as attending a four-year college from the beginning.
- Have similar estimates to those of higher-income students about first-year college costs and are equally likely to understand that these costs include room and board in addition to tuition.
- Despite having similarly strong college aspirations, experience more substantial “melt” between aspiration and enrollment than their higher-income peers, according to previous studies. This suggests a topic for further exploration.

Recommendations

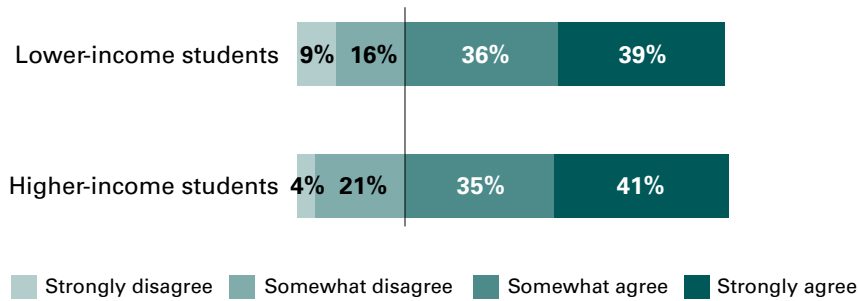
High schools and colleges should offer consistent support and follow-up to lower-income students to help ensure that college aspirations actually lead to college enrollment. For example:

- High-school-sponsored college information days/nights, including the involvement of parents;
- College outreach and recruitment visits to underserved secondary schools;
- Well-developed college and university informational websites;
- Encouragement of early college options, including community college; and
- Participation of schools and colleges in the CollegeKeys Compact™.

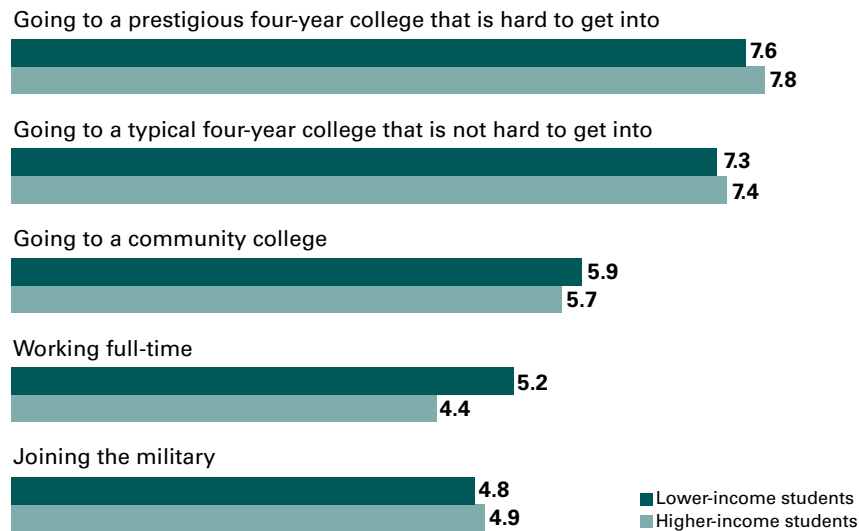
Students agree that “You need a college degree to be successful in life.”



Students agree that “It doesn’t matter whether you go to a community college for two years and then finish at a four-year college or go to a four-year college the whole time.”



Mean ratings of options after graduating high school



College aspirations reported in study compared to enrollment patterns from previous studies

	Plans reported in current study		2009 SAT takers’ actual behavior	
	Lower-income students	Higher-income students	Lower-income students	Higher-income students
Any college	93%	97%	75%	86%
Two-year	21%	15%	27%	20%
Four-year	72%	82%	48%	66%
No college	7%	3%	25%	14%

2

Although both lower- and higher-income students say they receive plenty of information from colleges, lower-income students are more likely to report being influenced by it.

Findings

Lower-income students:

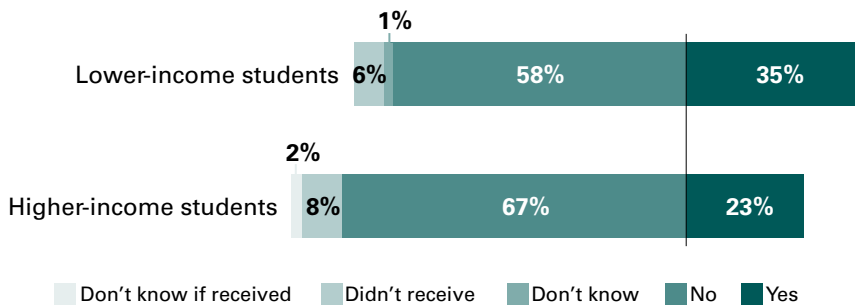
- Like their higher-income peers, say they received print or email advertisements from four-year colleges (94 percent of lower-income students and 90 percent of higher-income students).
- Are 12 percentage points more likely to report using the information from print or email advertisements to apply to a school they had not previously considered.
- Are more likely than their higher-income peers to mention individual colleges' websites (44 percent to 32 percent) and college search sites (42 percent to 24 percent) as "very influential" information sources.

Recommendations

Colleges should create or repurpose informational resources that target lower-income students and their concerns. Secondary schools should point students to a wide variety of information sources in the college search and selection process. For example:

- Expansion of targeted and highly segmented outreach and recruitment messaging;
- Early outreach to students and their parents;
- Outreach materials that address the specific interests and concerns of lower-income students relating to affordability and the availability of financial aid; and
- Improved student access to well-developed noncommercial, secondary information sources, such as online college planning sites.

Print or email advertisements caused students to apply to schools they might not have considered before



ADVISING COUNTS

In addition to the importance of information provided by colleges, other studies have investigated the effectiveness of personal contact. The National College Advising Corps places trained, recent college graduates in high schools to counsel low-income and first-generation students as they navigate the college process. Schools served by this program saw an 8 to 12 percentage point increase in college-going rates compared to a control group of similar schools in the area (www.advisingcorps.org/success-results).

3

Lower-income students especially value personal support from guidance counselors, teachers, college alumni and college representatives in deciding where to apply.

Findings

Lower-income students:

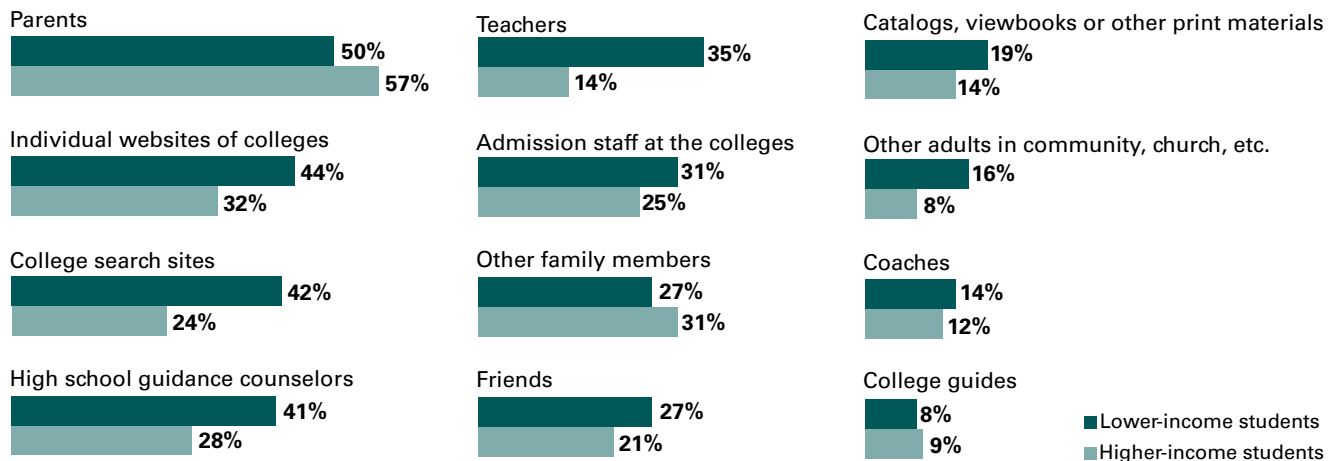
- Like higher-income students, say parents and college websites are their most influential sources of college information.
- Are more likely to single out high school guidance counselors (41 percent to 28 percent), teachers (35 percent to 14 percent) and other adults in the community (16 percent to 8 percent) as “very influential.”
- Value this “high-touch,” personal approach — especially those lower-income students with the lowest SAT scores.
- Say they would have been much more likely to apply to a four-year college or a more selective four-year college if they could have met successful alumni like them (62 percent) or if a college representative had reached out to them personally (60 percent).

Recommendations

Secondary schools should expand support for school counselors and programs that educate lower-income students about the requirements for college success. Colleges and universities should develop a multifaceted approach for personalizing their messages to students. For example:

- School district endorsement of programs such as the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy’s *Eight Components of College and Career Readiness Counseling*;
- Profiles of successful lower-income students and graduates in college outreach materials;
- On-campus programs to address the specific interests and needs of lower-income and first-generation students;
- Information targeted to parents; and
- Peer counseling support to help lower-income applicants find an appropriate college “match.”

“Very influential” sources of information about where to apply



4

Not surprisingly, lower-income students are more likely to be concerned about costs than higher-income students.

Findings

Lower-income students:

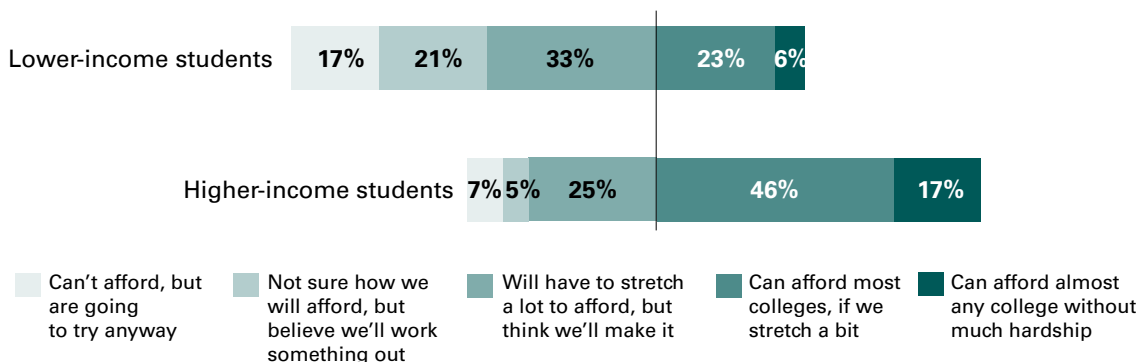
- Are much more likely than their higher-income peers to take financial aid into account (77 percent to 52 percent) when looking at the cost of college.
- Are about three times less likely than higher-income students (6 percent to 17 percent) to say they “can afford almost any college without much hardship.”
- Are half as likely (23 percent to 46 percent) to say they “can afford most colleges if we stretch a bit.”

Recommendations

As more lower-income and minority students apply to college, higher education institutions need to create financial aid and assistance policies that will open access to all students. For example:

- Tools to help families understand the cost of education early in the process;
- Support for sustaining the Pell Grant program;
- A simpler financial aid application process, especially for the federal application; and
- Continued efforts to provide clear and concise information about college costs and the availability of financial aid, including plans that reduce loan burdens for lower-income students.

Paying for college



5

Lower-income students are likely to apply to fewer colleges than higher-income students.

Findings

Lower-income students:

- On average, apply to fewer colleges than higher-income students (mean of 3.4 to 3.9 applications).
- Apply to fewer colleges, particularly those lower-income students whose SAT scores are in the middle and low ranges (mean of 3.2 applications).

Recommendations

In addition to helping lower-income students find colleges that are a good fit, both secondary schools and colleges should encourage these students to apply to slightly more colleges. For example:

- Appropriate use of common applications as an effective tool to broaden a student's set of postsecondary choices; and
- Endorsement of and support for national initiatives such as National College Application Week.

Mean number of schools applied to

Lower-income students



Higher-income students



Mean number of schools lower-income students applied to — by SAT scores

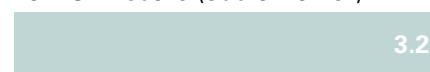
High SAT score (1100 or higher)



Middle SAT score (910–1090)



Low SAT score (900 or lower)



MORE THAN ONE APPLICATION = HIGHER ENROLLMENT

Research by the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center shows that increasing the number of applications a student submits significantly increases the probability of college enrollment. Students who apply to two colleges are 40 percent more likely to enroll than those who apply to only one. Increasing from two to three applications boosts the probability of enrolling by 10 percent. This effect diminishes beyond three applications and is strongest for lower-income students (<http://admissions21.collegeboard.org>).

6

Lower-income students and parents are in sync on many issues, but there are exceptions.

Findings

Parents of lower-income students:

- Are just as likely as lower-income students to consider financial aid integral to college enrollment and to welcome support from guidance counselors and extra tutoring.
- Are even more likely than lower-income students to value a college degree (87 percent to 76 percent) and to assume their children will attend college (98 percent to 93 percent).
- Are much more optimistic that their children could have gotten into more selective colleges (82 percent of lower-income parents to 66 percent of lower-income students), but are much less likely to have considered such colleges (74 percent of lower-income parents say they did not consider such colleges compared to 52 percent of lower-income students).
- Are much more likely than lower-income or higher-income students to say that they helped in the college admission process.
- Are less likely (32 percent) than lower-income students (53 percent) and higher-income students (38 percent) to say the application decision was “completely the child’s.”

Recommendations

Like parents in all income groups, lower-income parents influence their children’s college choices to varying degrees. However, lower-income parents have some special needs that secondary schools and colleges should address. For example:

- Early availability of information about the financial aid and college admission processes through outreach events, campus visits, information sessions and the like;
- Support for school counselors to provide assistance to lower-income parents; and
- Targeted outreach and campus programs that address the special needs and concerns of lower-income parents.

Ways parents have supported students’ college search and decision-making process

Figured out how to pay for college



Paid for materials/courses to prepare for SAT/ACT



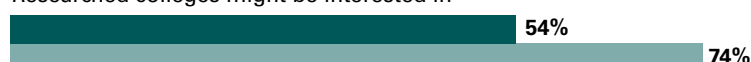
Visited colleges interested in



Decided which college is best



Researched colleges might be interested in



Filled out and submitted college applications



Eliminating Barriers to Higher Education in the Admission Process: What's Next?

The College Board believes that to attain a goal of 55 percent of our nation's youth achieving a postsecondary credential by 2025, access to and success in college are critical for all students, regardless of their background. Identifying barriers in the admission process — especially for lower-income students — is critical to creating policies and practices that open access to higher education.

As noted in this body of research on complexity in admission, we now have a clearer sense of what factors are and are not barriers and how to respond to them. The research also suggests other areas that may warrant future exploration, including the “melt” that occurs with so many students who have applied to colleges and completed the application process but do not enroll the following fall. Another line of

inquiry could investigate the factors or barriers in the admission process that prevent students from beginning the application process or cause students to end it prematurely. Understanding all these factors will help us make the connections between real-world experiences and policy evolution that result in innovative solutions to the challenges facing our education system today.

The Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century is committed to eliminating the barriers to college access and success. The results of this research and its recommendations will be widely shared with the admission, school counseling and financial aid communities most closely associated with the transition from school to college and with policymakers who will make the changes necessary to facilitate access.





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